

There's nothing more American than mom, apple pie...and bagels?

Brought to this country by Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the 19th century, the bagel has ascended the ranks to fast-food stardom. Once the domain of New York Jews, the rolls-with-holes have infiltrated McDonalds and Dunkin' Donuts — the ultimate inclusion. According to the American Bagel Association, 1,500 new bagel establishments opened during 1996 (the most recent year available), bringing the total to over 4,500 nationwide.

the bagelization of america



B Y E V E G L I C K S M A N

Call it the bagelization of America. But why the rise of a loopy looking loaf? Bagels are low in fat, but once you add cream cheese or butter, the caloric advantage plummets. Stanley Segall, Professor of Nutrition and Food Sciences at Drexel University in Philadelphia, attributes the bagel's boom to its having all the elements of a successful snack food: ready-to-go, easily portable, and no refrigeration required. Also important, "You can eat them with one hand and while walking. No utensils are needed."

Timing is everything too. Bagels would not have caught on before World War II when Jews were not as well accepted in the United States, Segall notes. The popularity of "Seinfeld" likely didn't hurt the chances of it becoming cool either. That, and studies like the one conducted at Indiana's Ball State University which showed that bagels offered the same carbohydrate benefits to athletes as the pricier energy bars. However you slice it, the bagel has become a hot property that crosses ethnic lines. Dough

giants like Einstein Bros. and Manhattan Bagel Company are everywhere. What started as a plain ring-shaped roll topped by poppy seeds or flavored with onion, however, has turned into a carnival of flavors that appall traditional diehards.

Cinnamon raisin bagels? Maybe. But pumpkin, sun-dried tomato, chocolate chip and jalepeno-cheddar bagels? If you really want to raise ethnic hackles, chew on a Hawaiian bagel with pineapple and Canadian bacon — blatantly unkosher. Traditionalists complain, too, that bagel makers are not remaining true to the age-old recipe where the dough is boiled for several minutes before baking. Eliminating this step produces a less chewy center and a crust that isn't crisp. The typical American bagel is soft like bread compared to the denser Eastern European original. Purists maintain that a good bagel needs no toasting or frivolous toppings either. Nix the strawberry cream cheese or pizza bagels.

The bagel's origin has been linked in conflicting stories to Hungarian, Russian, Austrian and Polish Jews. That is, of course, assuming you disregard persistent



rumors that Norwegians invented the bagel because they couldn't get anyone to buy smoked lox.

The first recorded mention of bagels was in Krakow in 1610 where a Polish community regulation decreed that "beygls" (a Yiddish word) be given as gifts to all women giving birth. The circular-shaped bread was seen as representing the continuation of life and the boundlessness of the universe...and therefore a ticket to luck and happiness.

In the United States, beygl became "beigel" after the first wave of immigrants, and eventually "bagel" in 1932. Another popular story about bagel beginnings is that a Jewish baker in Vienna wanted to thank the King of Poland for saving Austria from a Turkish invasion. In 1683, legend has it he created a hard roll in the shape of a riding stirrup — "beugel" in Austrian — to commemorate the monarch's favorite pastime.

Lender's Bagel Bakery, founded in Connecticut in 1927 by Polish immigrant Harry Lender, is significant because it was the first United States bagelry outside New York. Sons Murray and Marvin Lender subsequently figured out how to freeze the doughy treats that launched the bagel's export to other parts of the country.

Let the French eat their cake and baguettes; Americans have chosen bagels. Between 1992 and 1997, bagel consumption in the United States rose by 65 percent. Even emergency room physicians have been affected by the trend. Picture a legion of half-awake people in pajamas racing in with bloody-wrapped hands, the result of trying to slice their morning bagels. Ann Landers responded to the new wave of injuries several years ago by devoting a column to bagel-slicing safety. (Hint: start horizontally and end vertically).

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As to the bagel's expanding market potential, check your pet food aisle for the latest: rawhide bagels. Could liver and gravy bagels be far behind?

